

By Marty Madden, TheBayNet.com

With a decline in America's number of skilled workers and manufacturers, public school systems throughout the nation are trying to prepare students to do the necessary hands-on work.

On Monday, Jan. 23, U.S. House of Representatives Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer [D-MD District 5] visited Calvert County's Career and Technology Academy to speak with students, teachers and administrators about the importance about expanding the workforce.

"We need more and more of you," Hoyer told the students who participated in a brief roundtable discussion. The academy students, who attend Calvert's four high schools and are transported from three of those schools by buses to the academy in Prince Frederick (the academy shares a campus with Calvert High School), are enrolled in courses that teach a variety of skills. Among the Career and Technology Academy's classes are health professions, automotive service, carpentry, cosmetology, food production, graphic arts, computer programming, plumbing and welding.

Calvert County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Jack Smith had invited Hoyer to tour the academy several months ago. The congressman's visit comes as Congress continues to consider additional legislation related to the "Make it in America" initiative, a plan aimed at creating jobs and restoring America's stature in the global economy.

"We don't have enough people who know how to put things together," Hoyer told the students. He noted the U.S. has lost nine million manufacturing jobs in the last 20 years to factories overseas.

The students who met with Hoyer told encouraging stories about how academy classes have

helped them locate the road that could put them on a positive career path.

The classes he has taken at the academy have given student Cody Voegti the ambition to seek a career in nuclear welding or underwater welding, he told Hoyer.

“We have a shortage of skilled welders in America,” said Hoyer.

Career and Technology Academy welding teacher Dwight Bradford said experienced welders can earn an annual six figure salary. One drawback he’s found to recruiting students, however, is their reluctance to commit to going out-of-county many of the jobs are located.

“I love this program to death,” said Lauren Hall, a student in food production and management. “I’ve gotten more out of it than I thought I would.” Hall said her plan after graduating from high school was to earn a degree in hospitality management.

“I think any student who walks out of this program should be ready for entry-level employment,” said food production and management instructor Karl Hille.

Ryan Catterton admitted he enrolled in the carpentry program “for something to do.” Once Catterton got in the program he learned he could develop marketable skills.

Joy Weems is enrolled in the academy’s cosmetology program. While she sees the technology field as her future career, Weems said the cosmetology skills will help her get “a backup job” and she plans to be “working in a salon while going to college.”

Calvert High School student Jordan Smith is enrolled in the Academy of Health Professions and hopes to become a surgical nurse.

Hoyer commended her for taking that career path. “healthcare professions are our fastest growing professions,” he said.

Academy Principal Mark Wilding explained that the school system’s Career Technology Education Completer Program Pathways include several “articulated agreements” with community and technical colleges, universities and “memorandums of understanding” with local unions to aid the students in advancing toward their career goals. The school system recruits students for the various programs when they are sophomores. Wilding indicated that it is stressed to the students that enrollment in academy courses will not sidetrack or derail any plans a student might have about attending college. He also admitted that not every student is an instant success at the chosen programs. There are a small percentage of students “who are floundering. A lot of kids are going to change their minds and we have to understand that.”

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